Thoughts and reflection: Maxine Greene’s “How do we think about our craft”

This article brings up a few interesting comments and points throughout its complex thoughts on how teachers think about the art of teaching. One of the interesting quotes that Maxine uses in her article comes from the famous Pedagogist and philosopher John Dewey, stating *“the conscious adjustment of the new and old is imagination.”* I believe this refers to learning in such a way as people use prior experience (the old) as a way to interpret the world, combining this past experience with new experiences and trying to make sense of this input. Imagination comes when one actively brings together past knowledge and new knowledge to create new ideas. This philosophical idea of imagination and how it may work according to Dewey has everything to do with how the learning process takes place, imagination playing an integral role in how students gain knowledge, new skills, abilities, and grasp concepts in general. When we think about the craft of teaching “higher level questioning” often focuses on imagination, especially in the case of hypothesizing. Maxine states in the article *“We may find ourselves reconstructing familiar techniques, honing a set of unused skills, and-significantly-using our imaginations in what turns out to be an effort to improve our craft.”* From the teacher perspective imagination is crucial in tackling the needs of our students, finding different ways to better suit their individual learning styles and teach them in the most effective way possible. Teachers must have imagination to constantly construct and reconstruct lessons and adapt daily to the challenges there students put forth.

When Maxine states *“Nor, we now realize, is it appropriate to view potential learners as*

*deficit systems, empty vessels awaiting our ministrations,”* this directly correlates with Paolo Frierre’s book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in describing the banking method of education which has seen its prominence even in modern day education and today’s schools. As far as realizing that this model of education is not appropriate I would rather disagree due to it still be implemented wide spread and even increasingly now with the advent of standardized testing and test prep classes, which many are directly “banking” the necessary information to obtain higher scores and increase statistical data. Data that schools and more recently teachers are now being judged. I believe this is having a detrimental effect on our educational system that will not truly be realized until years to come.

Maxine goes on to talk about beginning realizations such *as “Gradually becoming aware of all this, we are beginning to recognize that every young person must be encountered as a center of consciousness, even as he or she is understood to be a participant in an identifiable social world. Each one may be encountered as a being who is at once a distinctive individual and someone whose consciousness opens out to the common, an intersubjective world in which he or she is inextricably involved,”* which I interpret as the balance between individual and community. On one hand teachers must differentiate, in essence individualize their instruction to most effectively meet students learning needs considering everyone learns in different ways. The distinctive individual is important to the teachers pedagogy, the distinctive individual as a concept is also important to impart on the student, and with that said, comes the intersubjective world where the distinctive individual must also be a part of a community with many diverse and complex social constructs within it. The main idea Maxine seems to be getting at is a more individualistic approach to modern day education, not just teaching a class of students, but rather a group of diverse individuals that form a class. This is the philosophy now being adopted, whether it is being implemented and what effect it is having still seems a question unanswered.

Another interesting piece of Maxine’s article is the following writing *“Anybody who sets out to teach his pupils to be critical must expect constantly to be embarrassed. He can also expect to be harassed, by his class, by his headmaster, by parents. If he gives up the idea of teaching his students to be critical and salves his conscience by training them in skills, this is not at all surprising. But he should at least be clear about what he is doing, and even more important, what he is not doing."26 Clearly, this is another challenge to think about our craft.”* I believe this piece expresses the challenge of teaching students to be critical thinkers. Maxine points out that teaching students to be critical can lead to being critical of the teacher’s performance. This can lead to a challenge of authority in the classroom where the lack of authority could lead to poor classroom management and not being able to effectively communicate or implement the lesson being taught. On the other hand, not teaching students to be critical can be an extreme detriment to their assessment of themselves, their learning, and the work they accomplish. This beckons my philosophies about how instruction in the classroom seems to be changing in the last few years. Being critical means high expectations, and often hard truths about the learning students accomplish and how they progress. With major pushes towards positive behavioral strategies in the classroom focused primarily on positive feedback, this can lack a critical nature in its delivery. To be critical can lead to negative emotions such as students exhibiting frustration and low self esteem self assessing their work as not being good enough because of the critical nature of the assessment. I have often found in my own experience it is an immense challenge to be critical of my students, and teach them to be critical of their own work and learning, while delivering this concept in a way that is positive. For example, Johnny plays a short musical excerpt out of a beginning music book, he plays half of the song with correct pitch, but his rhythm is bad, his tempo fluctuates, he does not play the written articulation or dynamic markings, and the latter half of the song has many pitch errors making it unrecognizable. As a teacher, would being critical mean that I explain in detail all these errors picking apart Johnny’s performance? As positive behavioral strategies have taught me in my learning of instructional practice, no, I would not. I would approach this scenario by first concentrating on the first half of the song and the attributes of that performance that were excellent, praising Johnny as I reviewed his work. I would then point out one or two of the major errors, and let Johnny try again focusing just on one or two of the problems. When Johnny corrected those errors after some brief coaching, I would again use positive reinforcement and move on to the other errors Johnny made. Am I being critical using this approach? What if I had ran out of time using this strategy therefore not being as critical in my assessment? Would not laying everything out in complete critical detail be to Johnny’s dismay, shattering his self esteem and motivation? But would it teach Johnny to be critical? Is my layered approach of positive reinforcement combined with a step based approach of critiquing a better way of implementing my instruction? From a psychological and emotional sense maybe, but to a pedagogical sense? These are many questions I still ponder to answer as I too reflect on my craft as Maxine Greene has done.